

Heroes of Today

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Mattie Stepanek is very busy. He speaks at conferences and participates in fund-raising events. He has been a guest on television shows in Chicago and New York City. He has written two number-one best-sellers. He owns a motorized scooter that he calls Slick. Although this sounds like an exciting life, Mattie has to deal with many hardships as well. Mattie is an 11-year-old boy with a life-threatening disease.

Matthew Joseph Thaddeus Stepanek likes to be called Mattie. He was born with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, or MD for short. MD interferes with the body's ability to breathe and also affects the heart. Mattie's muscles have become so weak that he has a hard time walking. His scooter is a motorized wheelchair. He must take a portable oxygen tank everywhere he goes. These things remind Mattie of the seriousness of his disease, as do the many time-consuming medical treatments he has to have each day. But despite the disease, Mattie enjoys many of the same activities as other children his age. He loves to watch baseball and read. He has favorite games and toys. He even has a first-degree black belt in a martial art. And like other 11-year-olds, he has schoolwork. Because of the complications related to his disease, Mattie is homeschooled instead of going to a regular school.

Every summer Mattie spends one week at Camp Maria, the Muscular Dystrophy Association camp in Leonardtown, Maryland. The camp motto is "Friends Helping Friends." A friend is assigned to help each camper. Mattie's friend helps him with arts and crafts, wheelchair football and baseball, singing, and dancing. At the close of the session, campers write their special wishes on a piece of paper. The papers are then put into a basket, which is tied to balloons and released into the air. The balloons sail into the sky, launching the wishes.

For the past five years, Mattie has made the same three wishes: to have some of the thousands of poems he has written published in a book, to meet one of his heroes, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, and to have his poems read on television. Now Mattie believes the balloon wishes work.

Mattie's first wish came true during one of his numerous stays in the hospital. Cheryl and Peter

Barnes, founders of VSP Books, read some of Mattie's poems and knew right away that they were special. In July 2001 the Barneses agreed to print some of the poems in a book Mattie entitled *Heartsongs*. His second book, *Journey Through Heartsongs*, was published in October 2001. More than 450,000 copies of both books have been sold.

While Mattie was in the hospital in Washington, D.C., another wish came true. He spoke on the telephone with Jimmy Carter. During their conversation Mattie didn't mention his disease. Instead, he and Mr. Carter talked of bringing peace to countries at war, such as Bosnia. Mattie thinks Jimmy Carter is the perfect hero. Since his presidency ended in 1981, Mr. Carter has worked for world peace and human rights. Mattie, too, wants to grow up to be a peacemaker and a politician.

On October 19, 2001, the last of his wishes came true. Mattie was a guest on Oprah Winfrey's nationally televised talk show. He talked with Ms. Winfrey about his desire for peace in the world. She read several of Mattie's poems on television. Some of Mattie's poems are about the ordeal of living with a serious disease. But Mattie doesn't always write about the hardships of life. Most of his poems are about hope, peace, and wisdom.

Mattie is the Muscular Dystrophy Association's 2002 National Goodwill Ambassador. As a spokesperson for Children's Hospice International, he speaks on behalf of sick children and their families. Although he has received many honors, Mattie feels that his greatest achievement is being alive today, especially since he has had many close calls throughout the years. Mattie continues to spread his message of peace and goodwill, hoping to inspire people to help others.

Mattie tries to live his life by three ideas. The first is to play in the puddles after every storm. The second is to celebrate life every day. The third is to never give up trying to reach what you want. Mattie's life is certainly a reflection of each of these principles.

Mother Teresa

In 1910, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (gon-KHA bo-yakh-YOO) was born in the country that later became Yugoslavia and is now part of Macedonia. She changed her name to Teresa when she became a Catholic nun.

In 1928, Mother Teresa went to teach at a high school in Calcutta, India. After 18 years of teaching, she believed it was her purpose in life to leave the school and help those living in poverty.

Mother Teresa began wearing a white sari similar to the dress worn by India's poor women. She took a nursing course, and then opened a school in Calcutta's slums. In 1950 she started a new order for missionaries. More than 24 women joined the order within five years. Mother Teresa opened a home for the dying poor of Calcutta; an orphanage; a home for people infected with leprosy; a home for the aging; a learning center to teach skills to the jobless; medical clinics; and shelters for homeless women and children.

In the 1960s, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity opened similar shelters for the poor in other countries. India's government and the Roman Catholic Church honored Mother Teresa for her work. In 1979, Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize for her care of the poor. She used her prize money to build more aid centers.

Mother Teresa died as a result of a heart attack on September 5, 1997, in Calcutta, India.

The Caddo

The Caddo were farmers. During planting season, the Caddo gathered from neighboring villages and worked together to plant each field, day after day, until all the farmland was planted. In this way, the Caddo community worked together to make sure there was enough food for the next season. The Caddo also made fine pottery. If the Caddo needed something they could not make or grow, they traded food and pottery with other Native Americans to get it.

Sea Kayaking Sojourns

Drive, cruise, explore, and escape: Exploring nature by paddle provides a flesh perspective.

You're gliding inches above the sea, under your own power, with access to the shallow waterway nooks that other types of boaters can only dream about. "Kayaking has all the thrills of swimming in open water, only it's faster, easier, and you stay drier," says George Gronseth, founder of the Kayak Academy in Issaquah, Washington. It's also a great way to explore both new and familiar places. "Being 20 feet offshore gives you a whole new perspective," says Gronseth. Rookies should start with a lesson or guided trip. Here are places where you can learn the ropes or explore on your own.

Apostle Islands, Wisconsin

By the 1930s, this archipelago that hunkers off the northwestern tip of Wisconsin on Lake Superior had been heavily logged, quarried, fished, and hunted. But the 21 islands that make up the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore have since reverted back to wilderness (only Madeline Island remains inhabited year-round). Surrounded by shipwrecks and framed by red sandstone cliffs, arches, and sea caves, the islands are ideal for exploration by sea kayak. Living Adventure (www.livingadventure.com) guides half-and full-day paddles, perfect for beginners, and overnight trips from June to September.

Galápagos Islands, Ecuador

Time was, the only way to experience the wonder of the Galápagos was on a cruise ship, where the itineraries are often dictated by the location of the largest concentration of iguanas, frigates, and other species. But in recent years, the government has permitted camping on Baltra and San Cristobal islands, opening up the way for kayak/camping adventures. "You'll get a better view of wildlife this way," says Peter Grubb, founder of ROW International (www.ROWinternational.com), which guides eight-day tours of the islands. "The big difference is proximity. In a sea kayak, you control your pace. There's an intimacy that you don't have on a ship."

Georgia Coast

Back in the 1500s, Tybee Island was a refuge for pirates who wanted to keep a low profile. But today the word is out on the barrier island and other Sea Islands, such as Little Tybee, St. Simons, and Cumberland. Kayakers love the Lowcountry for its open water, tidal creeks, marshes, and strategically placed sandbars, where you can surf waves without having to crash onto the beach. Sea Kayak Georgia (www.seakayakgeorgia.com) offers lessons, half-day outings, and multi-day camping trips. Southeast Adventure Outfitters (www.southeastadventure.com) guides nature tours throughout the Sea Islands and river lowlands.

Merchant's Row, Maine

They say that if you were to stretch out the entire coastline of Maine, with its thousands of islands, it would be longer than the coastline of California. Luckily, the Maine Island Trail Association (MITA) has mapped 350 choice miles of waterway, from Cape Porpoise Harbor on the west, to Machias Bay on the east. Camping sites along the way are on public parklands and private islands, where membership in MITA (www.mita.org) is your entrance fee. Merchant's Row, an archipelago of islands halfway up the Maine coast, is a favorite of Jim Dugan, a sea-kayaking guide and MITA volunteer. "I love the smell of salt water and the spruce trees, and the sound of seals barking at you," he says. "It's pretty amazing here." Maine Island Kayak on Peaks Island (www.maineislandkayak.com) in Casco Bay can get you going with a three- or five-day fast-track camp.

Baja California, Mexico

With its warm and largely calm waters, rich ecosystem, and rugged islands, the Sea of Cortez has become a major destination for sea kayakers. Most expeditions set off from the tiny fishing village of Loreto and explore the surrounding national marine park. You'll paddle alongside porpoises, sea lions, and if you're lucky, blue whales that are lured into the narrow bay by an abundance of the krill they crave. For serious whale encounters, Magdalena Bay on the Pacific coast is one of the three Baja lagoons in the world where thousands of grey whales go to mate and calve in the winter. The whales travel 5,000 miles from their Arctic feeding grounds. Sea Kayak Adventures (www.seakayakadventures.com) leads fully outfitted trips to both spots.

“Heroes of Today”

Gist Statements

Mattie Stepanek, who has muscular dystrophy, plays like other children.

Mattie’s first wish—to publish a poetry book—came true!

Mattie talked to President Carter and Oprah Winfrey about world peace.

Mattie loves life and shows people how to help others.

“Sea Kayaking Sojourns”

Gist Statements

Kayaking provides a unique perspective and access to tight waterways.

Interesting scenery around the Apostle Islands provides great kayaking experiences.

Kayaking the Galapagos Islands gives a better view of wildlife.

The Georgia coast offers a safe place to ride waves.

Merchant’s Row, one of Maine’s waterways, has many camping sites.

Kayaking Baja provides up-close encounters with varied sea life.

